

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 118 (2014) 21 – 28

---

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

---

SoLLs.INTEC.13: International Conference on Knowledge-Innovation-Excellence: Synergy in Language Research and Practice

# Communication Strategies of Women Leaders in Entrepreneurship

Nurul Alia Abdul Halim<sup>a,\*</sup>, Norizan Abdul Razak<sup>b</sup><sup>a,b</sup>*School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi Selangor, Malaysia*

---

## Abstract

Recent developments in the field of entrepreneurship have led to a renewed interest in communication and leadership. This paper is an investigation on female leaders' communication strategies in entrepreneurship and the factors for using those strategies. It interprets the strategies utilized by those women entrepreneur leaders in their workplace interaction with regard to the roles. Seven eligible women entrepreneur leaders who matched the selection criteria were observed and interviewed. The finding shows that a leader should be aware of the factors that focus on relationships, symbolic communication, body language, and cognitive complexity for a better, more effective communication strategy.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

*Keywords:* Entrepreneurship; workplace; women; communication ; strategy

---

## 1. Introduction

Efforts to forge greater gender equality have resulted in Malaysian women achieving significant progress in key socio-economic areas since Malaysia gained independence in 1957. *Progress of Malaysian Women since Independence* (2003), captures the achievements of women in education, health, economy, politics and power sharing, and decision making. They have enjoyed more autonomy than before and this is reflected by their progressive participation in the once male dominated political and professional arenas. Women of today have certainly achieved greater successes in society. Prominent women in society including Tan Sri Dr. Zeti Akhtar Aziz (Governor of Central Bank of Malaysia) and Dato' Siti Nurhaliza who has also ventured into the business world are among the great inspirations to many. In the corporate sector, MITI's own Datuk Dr. Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria, SME Corp's Dato Hafsah Hashim and MATRADE's Dr. Wong Lai Sum have all proven that they are all very capable women (Mukhriz, 2012).

Despite the progress and inspiration made, new concerns on the role and status of women have emerged that could adversely affect the participation of women in the economic and social spheres. Although it is apparent in

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: 019-6171808

E-mail address: [neoalia789@yahoo.com](mailto:neoalia789@yahoo.com)

the government service and corporate sector where women's participation in managerial and key positions have been increasing as more female graduates enter the labour market, the occupancy of top management posts by women in both the government service and corporate sector is still relatively low. Only highly qualified and exceptional women have succeeded in climbing the corporate ladder and have broken the "glass ceiling", which is gender or racial inequality, which could stem from communication breakdown (Baxter, 2012). Considering the fact that these women are better qualified than men, and are given allocations to succeed, why are they still not given the autonomy to lead? One of the reasons is that women lack confidence and skills in voicing out their rights through effective communication. Gunelius (2012) explains that there are many elements that occur in corporate environments which create the toxic culture that female entrepreneurs long to escape and this includes poor leadership skills and limited communication.

#### Objectives

- a) To investigate the communication strategies in entrepreneurship among female leaders
- b) To identify the reasons for using those communication strategies

#### Research Questions

- a) What are the communication strategies commonly practiced by female entrepreneurs in Malaysia?
- b) What are the reasons for using those communication strategies?

## 2. Literature review

The concept of women entrepreneurship is multidisciplinary in nature embodying economic, psychological, social, and cultural as well as environmental characteristics. According to Khanka (2000), a woman entrepreneur is a confident, innovative and creative woman capable of achieving economic independence individually or in collaboration, generates employment opportunities for others through initiating establishing and running an enterprise by keeping pace with her personal, family and social life.

Robbins (1998) maintains that communication serves four major functions within a group or organisation: 1) Control: Through communication, the leader can determine whether an employee is performing according to requirements or is experiencing job-related problems. Communication allows both the leader and employee to monitor progress towards the attainment of organisational goals. 2) Motivation: Communication fosters motivation by clarifying what role employees are to play, what is to be done, how well they are doing and what can be done to improve themselves. 3) Emotional Expression: To some employees, their work group is a primary source for social interaction. In this case, communication provides a release for the emotional expression of feelings and fulfillment of social needs. 4) Information: The most important function of communication is information. Every organizational member needs information to make decisions by identifying and evaluating alternative choices. With the competitive pressures facing organizations today, strategy formulation, decision making, motivating, team building, and negotiating are all based on managers' ability to communicate effectively.

### 2.1. Framework of the study

This study adapted a reconceptualised classic theory (Kanter 1993[1977]) on gender and leadership in order to provide insights for both sociolinguistic and management thinking. In this paper, Kanter's reconceptualised theory will be used to examine the strategies women leaders use to interact with colleagues in the key context of team meetings (Handford 2010; Richards 2006). Kanter claimed that there are four approved 'role traps' for women leaders especially in working organisations: Mother, Pet, Seductress and Iron Maiden, based on familiar historical view of women in power. The concept is further improved by Baxter (2012) to see a sociolinguistic view on the discursive resources that senior women utilize proactively to interact.

Kanter's (1993) theory of role traps was formulated on the basis of characterising senior women. The first role trap is that of the 'Pet' who is symbolically taken along on group events as a 'mascot' (Kanter 1993). The Pet is

assumed to not capable of acting on her own or being a proper grown-up, thus preventing her from displaying real power or competence. The second role trap Kanter identified is 'Seductress', an objectified view of women as primarily serving the sexual needs. According to Kanter, the seductress usually forms an alliance with one very senior man in the organisation, to gain influence with other seniors. The third role trap is 'Mother', which projects a traditional position of authority and care. According to Kanter, the role of Mother is socio-emotional rather than reliant upon professional authority. Finally, the fourth role is 'Iron Maiden' –the most powerful and stereotypically masculinised of the four. The Iron Maiden is considered to speak and behave aggressively, and she is routinely represented by colleagues as 'scary', 'tough', 'mean', 'hard', 'bullying' (Baxter 2010).

### 3. Methodology

The research was conducted using a descriptive multiple case study design outlined by Yin (2009) which is qualitative in nature. He also views a case study approach as an empirical enquiry to investigate a phenomenon in the actual context by utilizing various methods of obtaining data. The researcher spent periods of time with 5 female entrepreneurial leaders in Malaysia to gather detailed insights about the communication strategies and contexts in which these female leaders work. The goal is to understand what constitute 'leader in entrepreneurial language' in their respect.

The researcher observed and audio-recorded senior management meetings, which usually comprised a team of about 5 to 10 people. The observation was non-participant and overt in nature, where the subjects were aware that they were being studied; however the research purpose was not acknowledged. Senior management meetings are the primary focus of the investigation, due to several reasons. First, senior managers spend their lives moving from one meeting to the next (Handford 2010). Second, management meetings are key forums in which business people enact leadership through the use of language and paralinguistic (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999). During each meeting, the researcher also took notes on a range of contextual, linguistic and paralinguistic features such as speech acts, body language, and seating position. The observation in meetings was followed up with one-to-one semi-structured interviews to identify the reasons for using the communication strategies applied earlier.

### 4. Findings

In the following analysis, the researcher has selected illustrative data for analysis from a corpus of 10 meetings, with a primary focus on the observation and interview data involving the 5 women leaders and their team. Extracts for analysis below were selected on the basis of incidents in meetings that the women leaders themselves had identified in the interviews as interesting, significant or typical of their interactions with their teams.

#### 4.1. *Mother as a gendered resource*

According to Kanter, the role of Mother is rather socio-emotional than reliant on professional expertise. As a leader, she is expected to provide the service of a comforter and a sympathizer to colleagues. This is further supported by Holmes (2005), who suggested that the subject position of Mother combines 'authority with care-giving', to enact leadership effectively.

##### *Rapport Talk*

For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport, which is a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. It is transactional language where women offer other speakers an input and talk more about feelings (Tannen, 1990). To illustrate this, We explore the example of Entrepreneur 1 (E1), the Director of a leading early childhood education enterprise. Before the meeting started, E1 had a casual conversation between her staff discussing off record matters.

- 23 E1: Uh ... the kids all right? That day I saw Wani near the kindergarten ...  
 24 she did not look well...  
 25 All the paper given to all ...?  
 26 FF: He's a little cough last week ... his father is around ... they went out, got tired...  
 27 E1: Oh dad's here ... how fun

(E1, line 23-27, p.1)

The example above marks the beginning of a meeting with regard to the rapport talk engaged by E1 and FF, her subordinate. The talk is personal and it is aimed to get them closer. This is further proven by her rationale in the interview session afterward. She believed that a meeting should be started with a relaxed manner so that everyone can have time to settle down and pay attention afterward.

### *Emphatic stress*

In linguistics, stress is the relative emphasis that may be given to certain syllables in a word to emphasize a particular point. It also causes the listeners to pay attention to what is being stressed. The next example is taken from E2 during her general meeting, presenting opinion and using many emphatic stresses to emphasize her point.

- 123 E2: Ok to E-extra I think we have to change the approach to reading programs  
 124 I've shown that day... have you checked the Flashcard?  
 125 I have used it many times and it is indeed very effective, very quick, so easy to understand  
 126 So I'm asking all teachers to start on, because it's easy when the Students get the flow

(E2, line 123-126, p.5)

In the excerpt, emphatic stresses were put on words like 'very', and 'indeed', and it did deliver the speaker's intention to emphasize her point.

### *Negotiation*

Negotiation is a discussion among individuals to reach to an alternative which would satisfy all. Discussion here involves the exchange of one's ideas, thoughts and opinions with each other. Thus, a leader needs to have excellent communication skills for a healthy and an effective negotiation. This can be seen in the excerpt below, taken from a meeting session of E2;

- 209 E2: For PTM assignments, I remember registration later, ...  
 210 WN can you please handle. Hopefully no problem?  
 211 WN: But I do worry if there might be too much ... maybe because ...  
 212 form is not ready and there'll be many crowd that day ...  
 213 E2: I understand your tight deadlines...  
 214 but I want you to be in charge because you've done this already

(E2, line 209-214, p.9)

A good negotiation skill, according to the women will ensure job satisfaction among the workers. They will have a say in decision making and this is important to the dynamics of the group.

#### 4.2. Iron maiden as a gendered resource

Of the four gendered resources examined in this section, Iron Maiden was the one that appeared to be the second most actively utilised role by the female participants. Kanter (1993) characterised the role as ‘forthright’, ‘tough’ and ‘dangerous’, and suggested it might be the most powerful of the four.

##### *Report Talk*

For Iron Maiden, it is important that they have different connection and status as compared to their subordinates. As opposed to ‘Mother’, signs of intimacy such as Rapport Talk are less likely to show. Rather, the results of this study indicate that signs of independence, Report Talk are more significant. It is observed that in making a claim or in presenting an idea, the women have to be vocal and straightforward about it so as not to confuse the audience as well as stand up to their stances.

An example can be seen in one of the meetings conducted by E5, when she was assigning tasks to her subordinate:

90 E5: For English week, I put NL in charge,  
91 due to the groups, as many as 4...  
92 Health Week, DS in charge, SC please assist,  
93 do the same as last year  
94 And all the parents make sure they write their name ... ..  
95 for next year registration

(E5, line 90-95, p.4)

From the lines above, it can also be seen that Iron Maiden makes more declarative statements. They prefer not to allow negotiation or discussion; rather, they report or declare the decision by themselves.

##### *Assertiveness*

Whenever an Iron Maiden agrees or disagrees, she does so assertively and it is shown in her speech. She displays strong agreement and disagreement in facing an argument. In this study the women know they have personal power and they do not feel threatened when there is a disagreement. The lines below are an example:

231 E4: I want all to know that the gate without a doubt have to always be locked.  
232 a few times I checked and it was not locked.  
233 So certainly we have to take turn to guard that.  
234 I like what SR proposed, I want a schedule set up for this later

(E3, line 231-234, p.1)

By analyzing the lines above, it is apparent that the subject used words like ‘should’ and ‘have to’ to show strong agreement. In addition, she also used I statements like "I want.", "I need." to convey basic assertions.

### *Confrontational communication*

When dealing with a disagreement, Iron Maiden is also observed to be confrontational. However, confrontation here is more of a way to communicate effectively to the members. Rather than confronting without hard evidence, confrontational communication here is utilized as an opportunity to confront an ongoing problem or challenge head on. An example of a confrontational communication is highlighted below, taken from a meeting session of E1:

358 E1: How's progress with exam papers? Done?  
 359 by next month DONE...  
 360 KJ how? You should've hand in the syllabus  
 361 for the test.  
 362 How? We have to make sure we get the material ready for the test.

(E1, line 358-362, p.15)

### *4.3. Pet as a gendered resource*

It is found that there are certain cases of these senior women who appeared to utilise the gendered resource of Pet with her subordinates in the meeting context. According to Kanter (1993), the Pet is viewed as a 'cute little thing'; not expected to be fully competent, and might be teased by her colleagues. A pet is also the one who shows less authority and thus minimizing the power distance between her and her workers.

#### *Joking*

There are many benefits of using humor or jokes to communicate especially when one wants to win an audience. Humor is a tool that unites, and serves as a catalyst of communication, breaking the barrier between the superior and subordinate. Below is an excerpt of a meeting, chaired by E4:

360 E4: Ok, for this month, whoever wants to apply leave,  
 361 can forward to me. But give it early.  
 362 Wow ... all excited about leaves ... all with round eyes (laughter) no more work

(E4, line 360-362, p.15)

#### *Mitigating Hedges*

To show disagreement, it was observed in the study that the 'Pets' only exhibited mild disagreement. In a conversation, one may agree totally with what the other person said, or one may agree partially, with reservation. Mitigating hedges in a form of a word or a sound were used by the subjects to lessen the impact of an utterance and to soften the disagreement. An example of mitigating hedges in communication is highlighted below, taken from a meeting session of E1:

234 E1: I think, we do not need to have props for the new ones right ...?  
 235 if we did the new ones, may have not fit the size  
 236 so I feel it's okay if we use the old ones ... recycled  
 237 Besides, we can save time, right?

(E1, line 234-237, p.7)

## 5. Discussion

Kanter's role trap theory is still relevant to today's business world where women remain in boardrooms. The role can be reconceptualised as discursive resources that are translated through linguistic interactions. From the management perspective, these can be viewed as leadership strategies that senior women can utilise to their advantage. Terjesen et al. (2009) argue that women can have substantial effect upon organisational practices.

In the Malaysian context however, there is no significant evidence on the role of Seductress. There was also no evidence of the way these women's professional identities could be undermined by the gendered features of the particular resource. Indeed most of the women carried the role of Mother and Iron Maiden and this is in parallel with Holmes (2005, 2006) who has shown that senior women speak in more 'masculinised' ways in 'masculinist' workplaces. Schnurr (2009) finds that balancing professional and gender identities is a struggle for senior women; and Mullany (2007) also argues that overarching gendered discourses continue to govern corporate life, seeping into interactional and linguistic practices through the construction of gender stereotypes. Overall, the Iron Maiden, like the Mother, offers senior women a voice to demonstrate considerable personal power with their teams when necessary.

## 6. Conclusion

Kanter's theorisation has helped us to see that corporate gender stereotypes tend to be inhabited and 'lived' on a daily basis, but she observed only their entrapping behaviours. This paper shows that a social constructionist understanding of language as dynamic, interactive, fluid and resourceful offers a more positive explanation of senior women's use of gendered leadership language. However, these gendered resources do not define the full range of linguistic practices used by senior women in a management meeting or elsewhere; there are undoubtedly discursive gaps and spaces between the use of any gendered resource in which resistant, alternative or, indeed, gender-neutral discursive practices may flourish (Baxter, 2010). To conclude, it can be stated that an effective communication strategy should identify the working environment and stakeholders proactively, in order to manage communication with their members. It is also necessary to be thoroughly familiar with the leader's internal (speech characteristics) and external (working environment/members) factors. The overall strategic management of organisations is inseparable from the strategic management of relationships (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995). Before these relationships can be managed, however, the different members of the organisation must be identified.

## References

- Baxter, J. (2012). Women of the corporation: A sociolinguistic perspective of senior women's leadership language in the U.K. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 16 (1), 81–107.
- Baxter, J. (2010). Outside in-group and out-group identities? Constructing male solidarity and female exclusion in UK builders' talk. *Discourse Society*, 20 (4), 411–429.
- Chiappini, F., & Nickerson, C. R. (1999). *Writing business: genres, media, and discourses*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dozier, D. M., Grunig, L. A., & Grunig, J. E. (1995). *Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gunelius, S. (2012). 1 in 4 Women Entrepreneurs Left Their Corporate Jobs to Escape Toxic Cultures. *Leading Site for Business*
- Handford, M. (2010). *The language of business meetings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2006). *Gendered talk at work: constructing gender identity through workplace discourse*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Jariah M., Laily P., Mumtazah O. and Aini M.S. (2007). Women in Micro Enterprise: Contribution to Improve Family Economy. *Malaysia Journal of Consumer and Family Economics*, Vol. 6, 2003, 111–123.
- Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In Lerner, G.H. (Ed). *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the first generation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins (p. 13–31).
- Kanter, R. M. (1993/1977). *Men and women of the corporation* (1993 ed.). New York: BasicBooks.
- Khanka, N. (2000). *Entrepreneurship development*. Mumbai: Himalaya Pub. House.

- Mukhriz M. (2012) GCC-Malaysia Trade Investment Forum Focusing on Knowledge-Based Economy. *Kuwait News Agency*, p. 34.
- Mullany, L. (2007). *Gendered discourse in the professional workplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robbins, L. R. (1998). *A history of economic thought: the LSE lectures*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Schnurr, S. (2009). *Leadership discourse at work: interactions of humour, gender and workplace culture*. Basingstoke [England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Swann, P. (2002). *Corporate vision and rapid technological change the evolution of market structure* (Taylor & Francis e-Library ed.). London: Routledge.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*. New York, NY: Morrow.
- Terjesen, S., R. Sealy and V. Singh, 2009, “Women directors on corporate boards: A review and research agenda”. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 17(3): 320–337.
- The progress of Malaysian women since independence, 1957-2000. (2003). Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Women and Family Development*
- Women Around the World*. Retrieved December 25, 2012, from <http://www.womenonbusiness.com/1-in-4-women-entrepreneurs-left-their-corporate-jobs-to-escape-toxic-cultures/>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: design and methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications.